

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, 2008 (Year B)  
 Trinity Church, Park Rapids  
 Mark 13:24-37

Once again, the commercial sector has pre-empted Advent. Already, for at least a month, Walmart has been promoting seasonal sales with Christmas music piped all over their big box. They don't even call it Christmas any more. It is "the holiday season" -- a deft way of sidestepping any possibly religious issue. Still and all, in our many ways we are getting ready for the wonder and joy of Christmas.

The Advent season is a preparation for Christmas. We look forward with a kind of breathless expectancy toward celebrating the birth of the Child of Bethlehem. But Advent is more than that. On this first Sunday of the season it takes on a deeper resonance and a more somber tone. The altar and sanctuary are more austere. But for the Cross, the sanctuary brass is put away and we won't see it until Christmas. The color of our furnishings is blue, the same as in Lent.

Advent envisions the return of Christ in power and glory and judgement, according to his promise. The Church's earliest creed is exactly what you and I will recite in just a few minutes. "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." That is the great mystery of the faith, and the attitude it calls for is reflection and repentance.

For the Church, the Advent season begins on this first Sunday, not with the piping of a carol, but with the diapasons of a great organ.

Its chords and cadences are solemn.

Its imagery is awesome.

And its vision is both terrible and majestic.

Listen to the Gospel. Listen to the words of Jesus:

But in those days , after that suffering  
 The sun will be darkened,  
 And the moon will not give its light,  
 and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
 And the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with  
 great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels , and  
 gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth  
 to the ends of heaven.

Jesus recites the words of Daniel the prophet and affirms their vision as his own. He anticipates the words of the Revelation to St. John, the Apocalypse, the unveiling of a powerful mystery. It is a vision that is universal in its expanse. It embraces the entire history of Creation. It expresses mankind's most mind-

numbing fears and the hopes that go beyond our abilities to describe them. It is “apocalyptic” in the truest sense of that scary word. It is the alpha and omega of time itself -- the beginning and end of all things. It is the great Amen of the immensity that is God.

Too often the dark images of divine judgment have been used to control the faithful and frighten them into obedience. Those words are not a threat. They are a wake-up call. Their intensely poetic imagery serves to sharpen our awareness of God’s presence in the world and God’s promises for humanity. It also helps if we remember that in the earliest days of Christianity, the belief was that Christ would return immediately, within their own lifetimes. It was only when that didn’t happen and generations came and went that Christians began to see Jesus promise in the context of a much larger view of history; and in the long run, an even more powerful and comforting vision.

This gospel uses its mysterious, poetic language to say what scientists in our own time are beginning to understand and tell us in their technical and mathematical terms. They tell us that this universe, in which we are less than a grain of sand and briefer than a spark from the fire, is filled with unimaginable power and magnificence. They also tell us that just as this our universe had a beginning in a burst of power twenty billion years ago, it will also have an end. What most of the scientists are still unwilling, or too careful to say, is what the Scriptures proclaim: that in the beginning was God, and at the end will be God.

It’s in the ancient Psalm (103):

As for humanity, their days are like grass;  
Like the flowers of the field, so they flourish;  
For the wind passes over and they are gone.

...

But the steadfast love of the Lord  
Is from everlasting to everlasting.

The perception of the end of things is buried so deeply in our human nature that we don’t even recognize it. A good many of us will remember the popular song that Perry Como sang, back in our cheek-to-cheek dancing days: “ ‘Til the end of time, as long as stars are in the blue . . .” Time will have an end. The stars will be no more. But it is still good news. This is the Sunday of Hope.

The idea of time coming to an end in some billions of years, may not mean very much to you and me so far as our ordinary lives are concerned. But we do know that for each of us, our time will end. That is life’s certainty. At the end of our time Christ will be there. There is fear and trembling in it. There is pain in it. Jesus recognizes that and he makes distress the premise for his message of hope. It’s in the first line of the lesson: “after that suffering . . .” The Gospel is

unfailingly realistic. It takes human life seriously in all of its dimensions, including the distress that is an inevitable ingredient of a whole life. It is that quality of realism and honesty about the nature of life that makes the word of Christ the bed-rock of hope and saves it from the conceits of sentimentality and delusion.

I suspect that it is the ones who have suffered -- whatever the pain or distress -- it is they who are best able to judge the quality of hope. And it is hope, after all, that makes it possible for us to soldier on from day to day. This awesome vision of the end of things is meant to give us a sure and clear-eyed hope that, in the end, it is God's goodness and truth and justice and peace that will prevail, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary -- evidence that is so abundantly offered by the troubles of these our own times.

We are taught that every Sunday is an Easter; and so it is. In the same way it is also an Advent. It is always a test of faith. Soon, as I said earlier, we will say those few words that will declare all that can be said about the mystery of our faith, the Church's oldest and most basic creed: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

The Lord's Prayer itself says it: "Thy Kingdom come . . ." In every prayer we look for Christ to come to us. Advent breathes in all its power in the prayer which closes the great book of the Revelation to St. John. The very last words of the Bible:

He who gives testimony speaks: "Yes, I am coming soon. Amen  
Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Even so, come Lord Christ.

